LOST AND FOUND

November 5, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9
Luke 15:1-10

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?"
-Psalm 139:7a (RSV)

There is some pretty good theology in Robert Fulghum's delightful best-seller, All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.

"In the early dry dark of an October's Saturday evening, the neighborhood children are playing hide-and-seek. How long since I played hide-and-seek? Thirty years; maybe more. I remember how.

"Did you have a kid in your neighborhood who always hid so good, nobody could find him? We did. After a while we would give up on him and go off, leaving him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn't keep looking for him. And we would get mad back because he wasn't playing the game the way it was supposed to be played. There's **hiding** and there's **finding**, we'd say. And he'd say it was hide-and-seek, not hide-and-give-UP, and we'd all yell about who made the rules and who cared about who, anyway, and how we wouldn't play with him anymore if he didn't get it straight and who needed him anyhow, and things like that. No matter what, though, the next time he would hide too good again. He's probably still hidden somewhere, for all I know.

"As I write this, the neighborhood game goes on, and there is a kid under a pile of leaves in the yard just under my window. He has been there a long time now, and everybody else is found and they are about to give up on him over at the base. I considered going out to the base and telling them where he is hiding. And I thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive him out. Finally, I just yelled, 'GET FOUND, KID!' out the window. And scared him so bad he probably wet his pants and started crying and ran home to tell his mother. It's real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes." [p. 56-57]

This is a sermon about getting lost and getting found. It has always occurred to me that there is something about the experience of being lost that is more powerful than it should be. There are surely few things more frustrating or disconcerting. We have all done it... Not long after moving

to Chicago I summoned the courage to descend to the depths of Lower Wacker Drive, and somehow, before emerging at the north end, lost my sense of direction: When I emerged I turned the direction I thought north was and there was the lake! Of course my first assumption was wrong, obviously... easy enough to straighten out, but it took me a while to get it and it was unsettling until I did get it.

Sometimes being lost can be humiliating, particularly if you have family members or friends in the car relying on your sure sense of direction. The standard way to handle it, of course, is to keep driving with confidence, under no condition admit that you're lost, never stop to ask directions; keep driving faster...something is sure to turn up.

I suppose there's something about being lost that forces the issue of one's vulnerability, fallibility, mortality even. You know in that there is no threat to life, that it's simply a matter of collecting your thoughts, getting directions, and all, sooner or later, will be well. I do know an elderly couple, however, who were driving to Florida from Pennsylvania and decided to take back roads to enjoy the scenery - or rather he did, she was more interested in getting there - and somewhere in West Virginia he took a wrong turn and drove 400 miles out of his way. In any event no one ever perished because they were lost... on the back roads of West Virginia or the streets of Chicago or tortuous cul-de-sacs in suburbia. But the thought does occur.

Someone told me recently that deep in all of us, related to the fear of separation and rejection that Sigmund Freud identified as the source of our anxiety, is a fear of lostness. Often it is related to, or amplified by an early childhood experience. I remember the day we moved to a new neighborhood and I was taken to school with careful instructions about how to find my way home. I got lost. I remember walking in strange territory for what seemed like a very long time, knowing that I was becoming more lost. I also recall hearing the familiar whistle and the relief and joy when I looked down a hilly street and saw my father, looking for me.

Jesus was a master story teller. One time he drew on the power of the human experience of lostness and told a sequence of unforgettable vignettes. They are familiar favorites. The first is about a lost sheep and a shepherd who finds it. The second is about a lost coin and a woman who looks until she finds it. The third is about a father who has two sons, one of whom leaves home and is lost in a far country until he decides to return to his father's house; and the elder son who stays home but is equally, more seriously lost actually, by reason of his own resentment.

Together those vignettes represent a very new way of thinking about God and about religion... They were prompted by a tension which is present and mounting throughout the career of Jesus.

"Proper people" were noticing and complaining about the kind of company this presumptuous young Rabbi from Nazareth insisted on keeping. It was terribly important to them. It still is. The movie "Trading Places" was a very funny statement of that old dynamic. Eddie Murphy, an experienced survivor of the ghetto and Dan Akroyd, blue-blood, Ivy League,

Philadelphia broker, trade places and each has to deal with the reality that is often known by the company one keeps. Not wonderful sociology but when Murphy's old friends trash his new apartment, smash Ming vases and rub out cigarettes in the Oriental rugs, or when Akroyd's old friends, at the tennis club and the Union League Club, absolutely shut him out because of his station in life, the point is eloquently made. Proper people notice. You are known by the company you keep.

The proper people weren't bad. They were proper: politically, socially, morally, religiously. They were the pillars of society, the intellectual elite, the financial and commercial leaders. They are identified as the Scribes and Pharisees: the religious leaders: church officers, if you will. And they didn't like it at all when this young Rabbi from Nazareth presumed to comment on their values, while seeming almost to go out of his way to violate and contradict them...nowhere as blatantly as in the company he kept. How in the world can you be a teacher of religion and associate with "those people?"

"Those people" were known to the proper people as sinners. They were essentially common folk who had neither the time nor the resources to participate in the niceties of formal religion. They didn't observe the rites and the rituals: they couldn't afford to buy the prescribed animals to use in Temple sacrifices, they didn't keep kosher kitchens, they generally disregarded the formal rules and the informal customs by which polite society governs itself.

Jesus spent a lot of time with these people: the outcasts, the underdogs, the poor. It was not only bad taste socially, it was also an intentional abrogation of a clear religious rule. Because they hadn't the time or the inclination to be properly religious, these people were officially unclean... It was forbidden for a clean person, a good person, to associate with them, particularly to sit down at table with them.

So the picture is Jesus in the shabby home of one of these people, at table, eating. And a small cluster of people outside, Pharisees who wouldn't be caught dead in a house like that, peering in, seeing him and clucking, "Would you look at that! Who in the world does he think he is, associating with them and then presuming to lecture us?"

That's the kind of comment Jesus must have heard... And I sense that it was to his table companions, who were lost according to the accepted standards of religion, but also to the people peering in through the door who were just as surely lost, that he told these little stories.

The first one draws on an image everybody loves - the shepherd. Moses was called a shepherd. David the King was a shepherd boy. The images of shepherds and sheep are rich... but there is an interesting twist. Actual shepherds were among the sinners with whom the Pharisees would not, could not associate. So even the character in the story supports Jesus' commentary on the values of his critics. The story is powerful. This shepherd does something a shepherd would not do. He leaves ninety-nine sheep alone to track down one who was lost. And when he finds it, he leaves the ninety-nine again while he carries the little lost sheep

to the village for a homecoming celebration. The shepherd actually works for those people, tends to their sheep. So they're happy he's found one but their major concern is that he walked away from ninety-nine.

This is a complicated metaphor but its point is both clear and radical. Religion that excludes and divides is wrong religion. True religion unites, includes, invites all to table. And God... not the heavenly gatekeeper, checking credentials at the door, but the strong shepherd who will go wherever necessary to make sure that all are included.

The second story makes the same point but with a more provocative character, a woman, herself an outcast in a society which was absolutely patriarchal. She has lost one coin and turns her house inside out until she finds it.

Not only is your religion wrong, Jesus is saying, with all its rules and regulations excluding people, so is your basic notion of God. In fact, it's because your theology is so off base, that your religion is so bad. God, the presumptuous Rabbi from Nazareth was proposing, is like a shepherd who goes after one lost sheep and stays at it until he has found that sheep and brought it safely home. God is like that woman - a breathtaking simile who will not stop searching until she has found the lost coin.

That is a very basic posture which distinguishes Judeo/Christian religion from all the religions of the world. A handy definition of religion is "the human search for God." It has occupied a good portion of the human race's intellectual and physical energy. It has inspired poetry, music and architecture...cathedral buildings... It is the god of philosophy, literature, and even science: to know ultimate truth... or to know for sure that there is no ultimate truth... Steven Hawking's, A Brief History of Time, is characterized as the brilliant astrophysicist's attempt to "know the mind of God." Some religions emphasize introspection and meditation: some focus on disciplined study and prayer: others on rigid self-denial: some emphasize emotional catharsis. But almost all of them end up with a form of exclusivism: "our religion is the only way to find God: all others are wrong, misguided, ultimately dangerous." Some of the sorriest chapters in human history were written because highly motivated, disciplined religious purists believed they had to do whatever was necessary to protect the purity of the true faith and to guarantee the ultimate salvation of more people by eliminating the competition. The people who burned witches in Salem were highly motivated people who believed they were acting in the best interests of the community. And before that the Inquisition was sincerely committed to the notion that the faith once delivered had to be cleansed and protected from the threats of heresy.

There is a tragic flaw in human religion, or at least a tragic potential. The "I Found It" bumper stickers of a few years ago were harmless but they expressed the view that "we're all looking for the same thing - but I know the only way to reach it." An appropriate rejoinder had a Star of David on it, the lettering looked Semitic and it announced, "We never lost it."

Before it becomes a religion which excludes, the earliest ideas in the Bible are about a God who includes: a God who decides to create human beings, who decides to love them, who nurtures and cares for them, who wants them to live in peace with one another and in responsible accountability with God. Behind it all is a God of infinite graciousness, a "courteous" God said Julian of Norwich, a God who welcomes all and excludes none, a God whose whole purpose is not to recruit an exclusive club of the elect but a whole family of humankind."

One of our oldest ideas is that God works at including all: God the seeker, the pursuer... if religion is a search, the one doing the searching is God.

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit,
or whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

asked the Psalmist in those haunting images.

"If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there thy hand shall lead me
and thy right hand shall hold me."

That's a very different idea of God: not at all a gatekeeper, excluding all but those who have obeyed the rules, performed the duties, affirmed the creeds... this is a God who pursues, lovingly follows the lost sheep, keeps at it, even to the far reaches of time and space until the lost one is found. So Francis Thompson's mystic poetry...

"I fled Him, down the nights
and down the days

I fled him down the arches of the years:

I fled him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter...
From those strong feet that
followed,

Followed after."
[The Hound of Heaven]

There are many places to get lost in the middle of life. And it's no secret that when Jesus talked about the human condition he rarely used categories of sin but frequently employed metaphors of lostness.

Intense suffering and physical pain feels like abandonment, which is a form of lostness. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus cried out in pain and it was a confession of radical lostness not unfamiliar to us. The death of someone you dearly love is a kind of lostness. So is the rupture of any relationship that grounds you, centers you, tells you who and where you are. The loss of your dream... the

hopeful vision with which you began your adult life and which after many alterations must be discarded - feels a lot like being cast adrift in open seas,. lost. There is an entire literature about the moral lostness of living entirely for self, the aimlessness of a narcissism measured only by the "stuff" we are able to accumulate.

Some lostness is self-imposed. In Fulghum's essay he writes about a friend who was dying of cancer. "He was a doctor. And knew about dying and he didn't want to make his family and friends suffer through that with him. So he kept his secret. And died. And everybody said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence and not tell everybody, and so on and so forth. But privately his family and friends said how angry they were that he didn't need them, didn't trust their strength. And it hurt that he didn't say Good-bye. 'He hid too well.' Getting found would have kept him in the game. Hide and seek, grown-up style." [p. 57-58]

"I don't want to bother anyone." Lostness self-imposed... Some of it is our stubbornness, our pride, our sin which Jesus doesn't condemn so much as identify it as lostness.

You have to want to be found, I suppose. In personal relationships you have to be vulnerable, come out of hiding. You have to open and expose self to risk and pain and love and ecstasy. No one can do it for you. People who love you can keep the search going, keep pursuing you, but in love, you have to allow yourself fully to get found.

And so it is with God.

God, Robert Fulghum suggests, doesn't play Hide and Seek, but a variation called Sardines. That's when "the person who is 'It' goes and hides and everyone goes looking for him. When you find him, you get in with him and hide there with him. Pretty soon everybody is hiding together... and pretty soon somebody giggles and somebody laughs and everybody gets found. Me, he says, I think old God is a Sardine player. And will be found the same way everybody gets found in Sardine, by the sound of laughter of these heaped together at the end."

How and where does it happen? I think our being found depends on where we are lost. I believe God finds us sometimes...

- in the experience of a troubled conscience

- in anger over injustice

- in impatience with ourselves.

I think God finds us

- in experiences of intense passionate love

- in deep and profound grief

- in experiences of breathtaking and heartshattering beauty

I think God finds us

-- in moments of insight when we know our

own mortality - our smallness -

our weaknesses - our lostness.

Emily Dickinson, who thought a lot about how God comes to us, wrote:

"He fumbles at your spirit
As players at the keys
Before they drop full music on;
He stuns you by degrees..."
[The Master]

And Robert Fulghum's "Get Found, Kid" was put more eloquently by Francis Thompson - when, at the end of The Hound of Heaven, the chase is over and the voice says -

"Rise, clasp my hand
And Come!
Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest
I am He whom thou seekest."

Jesus said simply -

"And what one of you, having a hundred sheep... does not leave the ninety-nine and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? God, I believe, pursues us when we are lost... when we hide. God, I believe, searches for us across the labyrinth of years we are given.

We live by grace... we will be found... the matter rests in the hands of God...or...on the shoulders of God, if you will.

It's difficult to improve on the way the old hymn says it:

"Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love, he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing brought me."

Amen.